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Extending prescribing responsibilities to Orthoptists

Dear Professor Rastrick

We are writing to highlight the increasing need to extend independent prescribing privileges to Orthoptists. We are deeply convinced that this would improve patient care, patient vision outcomes and reduce waiting times. NHS England highlights Ophthalmology as the UK's busiest outpatient department, responsible for 10% of the overall NHS waiting list. By empowering Orthoptists with independent prescribing, we can significantly accelerate patient recovery, allowing a quicker return to work. This proposal therefore offers a potential solution to both optimise patient vision and overall quality of life, as well as boosting economic productivity.

The Rt Hon. Lord Blunkett, has recently given his full and public support to this proposal and has written to Lord Streeting to advocate for this. Lord Blunkett has publicly backed our #PrescribingNow campaign. As you will know, six of the AHPs have come together for this campaign, collectively calling on the UK Government to begin the process of extending independent prescribing responsibilities to us.

The AHPs strategy for England-AHPs deliver prioritises several key areas that our campaign aligns to, such as AHPs leading change, being further developed, commitment to patient health and wellbeing, as well as provision of solutions which reduce service fragmentation and address patient demand.

The Royal College of Ophthalmologists' 2022 survey revealed that 75% of NHS ophthalmology departments were unable to meet patient needs; with 70% concerned about patient backlogs. Nearly 200 patients every year in the UK, experience significant vision loss due to delayed medical treatment and many experience high anxiety as a result (BOSU, 2017; Hingorani, 2019). Orthoptists are ideally positioned to diminish the capacity-demand gap. By empowering Orthoptists with independent prescribing rights, we can ensure patients receive the necessary care promptly, significantly reducing the risk of preventable blindness often associated with lengthy appointment waiting times.

Orthoptists are known for their expertise in the diagnosis and management of eye movements, visual development in children, and binocular vision. Increasingly however, we work in advanced or extended roles across ophthalmology, such as paediatric ophthalmology, neuro-ophthalmology, oculoplastics, cataract, glaucoma, emergency, medical and vitreo-retinal, and low vision. Orthoptists are currently the only profession in the eye care workforce without independent prescribing rights. In 2018, the Human Medicines Regulations 2012 (Schedule 17) introduced exemptions as a legal framework for Orthoptists, allowing annotated Orthoptists to supply a small number of prescription only and pharmacy only medicines to patients, which has been an excellent success. To date, there have been no serious incidents reported since the Exemptions framework was implemented for Orthoptists. Independent prescribing is the natural progression, bringing Orthoptists into alignment with other eye-care professions (Optometrists and Ophthalmic nurses).

Presently, Advanced Practitioners (APs) in Ophthalmology upskill to this role from three base professions: Orthoptics, Optometry and Ophthalmic Nursing. The vision and strategy for APs in Ophthalmology is to relieve workload burden on Ophthalmologists, yet Orthoptist APs are hampered in achieving this due to lack of prescribing rights, leaving them discriminated against in these roles. This is a source of frustration for Orthoptists and Ophthalmologists who acknowledge the excellence of Orthoptist APs, especially in specialist areas such as neurology and paediatrics.

At The University of Sheffield we offer highly regarded professional programmes: the BMedSci Orthoptics for pre-registration education and an MMedSci ACP Paediatric Ophthalmology which facilitates upskilling as an AP. We are committed to providing a course promptly, should any legislative amendments be enacted.

We respectfully ask that now is the time to act: the demand for outpatient appointments in all fields of ophthalmology increases year on year due to an ageing population and the rise of health-related crises, such as the diabetes epidemic. Consequently, the demand and capacity gap continues to widen and Orthoptists provide a timely solution to meet the workforce needs.

Yours sincerely,

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